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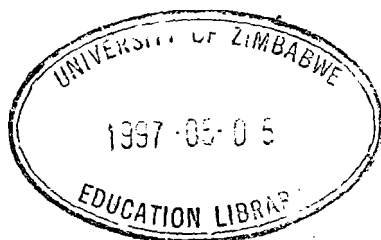
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TOWARDS AN EVALUATION OF LANGUAGE INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF EASTERN AND SOUTHERN AFRICAN LANGUAGES : A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

No one doubts that evaluation serves an important role in the teaching and learning process. In particular, evaluation of instructional materials dictates the way in which learning takes place. There is now widespread agreement among evaluators that none of them can reasonably claim to operate from a value-free position. The thesis of this paper is that all participants in the process of teaching and learning should be involved in evaluating programmes and materials used to teach them. The paper observes that those involved in language instructional materials evaluation will often ask different questions and explore different, possibly even conflicting criteria for judging the "failure" or "success" of instructional materials. The paper looks at the evaluation likely to be performed by participants. It proposes ten categories of participants and these are:

- (1) the consumer of the programme (i.e. the pupil);*
- (2) the parent;*
- (3) the deliverer of the programme (i.e. the teacher);*
- (4) the head of the institution;*
- (5) the college lecturer (as a teacher trainer);*

- (6) *the education officer/inspectorate;*
- (7) *Curriculum Development Units personnel;*
- (8) *the researcher in education;*
- (9) *the publisher;*
- (10) *and the developer of materials.*

The paper demonstrates that there can be no one approach to materials evaluation which serves all purposes, and that the whole topic can, and should, be looked at from more than one perspective.

While no actual evaluation of programmes or materials was done in order to write this paper, its contents are nevertheless, based on sound principles in the field of evaluation. In this respect, the paper is intended to serve as a guide to educationists on the factors to be taken into account in evaluating instructional materials.

Introduction

There has been a rapid increase in new language instructional materials, more especially in the former British colonies in the eastern and southern regions of Africa. These instructional materials are either published or unpublished. Although this development has been, and is still taking place, it appears as though it has not been accompanied by a corresponding growth either in the number of formal evaluation studies or an increasing awareness of the nature of the general relationship between evaluation and the teaching-learning process. The starting point, in this paper, is the assumption that evaluation is more than a mysterious activity secretly performed by a particular specialist group, known as "testers" or perhaps "researchers". Further, the paper attempts to explore the belief that almost everyone connected with the teaching-learning process performs evaluations, though possibly at different times, with different aims and in different ways.

The first part of this paper looks at a number of individuals who are supposed to be connected with the evaluation of language instructional materials and then considers the nature and purpose of the evaluations they are likely to make. Part two considers, very briefly, the operation of networks in evaluation.

Some Perspectives on Language Instructional Materials Evaluation

The Learner

Not all learners follow class-based learning, some learn through distance education. However, wherever learning takes place, learners are continually forming spontaneous opinions about the teacher (if there is one), the materials they study, and their own performance. One major effect of this is the abandonment of some instructional materials (i.e. textbooks) by the learners long before they have read their main contents. A second, though not drastic effect, relates to the fact that many learners seem to feel that studying certain languages is unduly "masculine" or "feminine" (Potts, 1985). Unless positive evaluation attempts are made to dispel such feelings, the materials themselves may well contribute to a serious loss of motivation by teenage learners, in particular.

Given the extensiveness of evaluation by learners and the known links between motivation and subsequent learning, the exploration of the ways in which learners arrive at their opinions constitutes an important research area. This means that it is imperative to study attitudes of learners towards language learning tasks at the time the tasks are being performed and not just at the end of the course. If these evaluations are to affect the design of teaching materials, and help resolve the current problem of how formative assessment procedures which increase motivation can be designed (Parsons, 1993), then the developer needs to know in some detail how attitudes to the previous tasks affect attitudes to later ones. Researchers generally also need some idea of the extent to which learners are capable of evaluating details of the structure and content of materials.

The Parent

Parents frequently scrutinise their children's language course books, either in an attempt to help them with such things as homework or to discover whether the teacher is following guidelines as stipulated in the texts. Parents may also probably be conducting what we may call "negative" screening in order to check whether textbooks do not contain words or references which are felt to be inappropriate or offensive, sexually, racially, tribally, or otherwise. All this is part of evaluation of instructional materials by parents— an evaluation which needs to be encouraged. However, the problem is that there is no formal feedback from parental evaluation. Evaluation by parents needs to be formalised in order to improve the quality of instructional language materials in, for example, the following languages: Chichewa or Yao (Malawi); Shona or Ndebele (Zimbabwe); Swahili (Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda); Bemba, Lozi, Tonga, and Nyanja (Zambia); Zulu or Xhosa (South Africa).

Parsons (1990) observes that parents's evaluation is highly predictive of the learner's motivation and ultimately language proficiency. Therefore, evaluation by parents, should not be dismissed lightly. Yet there is little, if any, discussion in the literature about what parents might be looking for in documents produced by publishers which explain to parents why language teaching materials look as they do.

The Teacher

From a professional point of view, it is obvious that teachers need to screen language instructional material in order to determine its suitability to particular levels of pupils in the teaching-learning process. A traditional approach teachers often apply is the checklist (e.g. Bartel, 1974; Chastain, 1976). These lists are in some ways similar to those designed by Munby (1978) and Yalden (1983). They are adapted for evaluating instructional material. While checklists probably serve to focus attention on certain useful points, the questions frequently fail to indicate what might be considered as "good" or "bad" consumer (Farr & Tulley, 1985); and often do not ask questions such as:

1. How flexible is the instructional material and how much detailed help with adaptation is provided by the author?
2. How is creativity encouraged and controlled for language teaching purposes?
3. How far is the learner likely to master the limits of the rules (or frames, or conventions) being taught, apart from simply coming across correct examples of their use?

The last is equally important when one evaluates how discourse strategies and topics like metaphor are taught and is not restricted to the question of syntax.

When it comes to monitoring of students' progress during a course and noting how this relates to deficiencies in the materials, there is even less help available to the average teacher. Not only are there very few theoretical models of class-based language learning, but there are also, as Swales (1985) laments, very few published accounts of what happened when a particular course was used—there is just no publication on language instructional materials evaluation results.

The situation in which teachers typically find themselves is one of personal survival, and this means that they need to develop a range of evaluation skills. For example, a book by Ngugi-wa-Thiongo may be selected in preference to one by Charles Dickens, because probably:

- the teacher finds it less complicated to interpret;
- the teacher is conversant with the cultural values reflected in the text;
- the previous year students used it, and there is no need to buy different new language instructional materials.

It is therefore extremely important that publishers and developers of materials should know how teachers use different types of books and what they would really like to see in them. Presumably, different types of language instructional materials are appropriate for different aspects of language and teaching situations, but there is not much research in this area. Even the excellent comparative review of teachers' guides by Coleman (1985) did not examine how teachers actually used them. This aspect therefore needs to be researched.

The question of teachers' books is related to the fundamental question of what sort of language instructional materials teachers would actually like, and who they would like to evaluate them. An informal teacher workshop in Hong Kong (Low, 1985) found that the teachers involved wanted detailed user-evaluation plus lists of who had written what. More importantly, they felt strongly that neither should come from publishers or an education authority as both had, by definition, a vested interest in not publicising deficiencies in approved language instructional materials.

The Head or College Principal

Heads of institutions might be expected to take an interest in the funding of courses but there are few studies of their reactions to language teaching courses that we do not know what influence they actually bring to bear. It may simply be noted here that heads have traditionally been more directly answerable to the education authority and their institution's governing board (as well as being that institution's formal spokesman with regard to mass media) and that means that their evaluation of a course may differ markedly from that of a teacher or even a learner. For example, a study by Farr and Tulley (1985) found that heads of institutions were more interested in raising funds for the purchase of language course materials and tended to ignore the impact they have had on teachers and pupils. Similarly, studies by Lewkowiez and Moon (1985) and Low (1987) indicated unwillingness on the part of heads of institutions to participate at course evaluation workshops, citing administrative responsibilities as major reasons for not attending.

The position of this paper is that they must be involved in language instructional materials evaluation through school committees initiated by themselves.

The Teacher Educator/Trainer

Teacher educators should be in a position to take a broader view of the importance of instructional materials than classroom teachers. For example, good teacher educators need to examine language instructional materials in terms of what they offer, their type, and the level of learners they suit and for the purposes for which they are to be used. It has been noted that teachers, on the other hand, are more often concerned with relating materials to specific needs (Parsons, 1990). Thus teachers are likely to use convergent, rather than divergent thinking in their evaluation.

In their evaluation, teacher educators should take into account the linking of theory with practice. For example, in evaluating novels by Earnest Kanchingwe (Malawi), Dominic Mulayisho (Zambia), Charles Mungoshi (Zimbabwe); one may ask whether they have any theoretical or practical relevance to African culture.

Similarly, teachers are likely to be concerned about a textbook that fits into the official syllabus. One of the jobs of the teacher educators is to try and get the syllabus modified through college-based language instructional evaluation which would probably suit student teachers in their final year of training.

The Education Officer Inspectorate

There is no common terminology here, some countries refer to these officers as *inspectors*, others prefer the term *education officers*. Whatever terminology is used, these officers have dual responsibility. On the one hand, they check whether institutions under their care are running smoothly and maintaining standards; on the other, they offer expert advice and take the lead in organising workshops and/or in-service training

programmes. The latter responsibility (i.e. advisory role) means they must liaise efficiently with publishers, teachers, heads, researchers, and administrators. The question is : How many of them do that?

With regard to evaluation, education officers both evaluate and are themselves evaluated (presumably self-evaluation in some cases). This, as has been pointed out many times in the literature, can lead to considerable tension, when an inspector/education officer is unwilling, for example, to let his research assistant publish a study which shows that he himself alienated teachers and pushed through a language textbook which has had disastrous results. A study by Bogdan and Taylor (1973) found that some officers employed a range of inexplicit and veiled techniques for pushing evaluations in certain directions and not others and thus resulting in biased evaluation of language instructional materials.

Although in theoretical and practical terms teachers and education officers are involved in language materials selection, these officers have an additional problem especially in those states under military regimes and/or experiencing political instability (e.g. Angola, Mozambique, Rwanda, Burundi, Liberia etc). Civil servants in such countries are not likely to openly criticise the government of the day even when language instructional materials evaluation shows that the government has approved unteachable materials. In such cases, it is perhaps better to have independent evaluators who are not civil servants and confine education officers to the professional advisor's desk.

Curriculum Development Units Personnel

Once again, we are caught up in terminological inconsistency. Some states within Eastern and Southern Africa refer to these institutions as *units* whereas others call them *centres* or *institutes*. Their function is to screen new instructional materials in various subjects and decide whether to recommend or approve them. The work of this personnel is frequently not open to public scrutiny, but one might expect them to consider questions of relevance of the material to the official syllabus, and the suitability of some aspects of language to the learners.

The personnel working in these units/institutes are often government employees whose evaluation is largely intended to buttress the government line of thought. They, therefore, do not ask questions they would if they were operating as independent evaluators (Potts, 1985).

With regard to working conditions for this personnel, Farr and Fuley (1985) found that in the USA, teachers working on part-time basis on textbook adoption committees were sometimes asked to complete rating sheets containing up to 180 items per textbook. The result was the development of "survival evaluation" known in the USA as the "flip test". The evaluator flips through the book and judges it primarily on the basis of "eye appeal". In an earlier study, Courtland (1983) found that under such conditions personnel simply rejected the role of matching textbooks to curriculum objectives and relied almost entirely on their teaching experience.

One might argue that with better funding and political will, various models of curriculum committees could be tried, until those appropriate to given situations are found. However, little research seems to have been done on the process by which language instructional materials, in particular, are selected, and even less is known about the relative strengths and weaknesses of different types of curriculum committees.

The Educational Researcher

Although many people within the teaching-learning system may engage in research of various sorts in addition to performing their other roles, there are a number, who are employed as "research assistants" or "research officers", who do nothing else but research. Such personnel are quite likely to be hired by, say, an education officer as part of a project team because of their specialist knowledge of evaluation. There are even people who limit themselves to the role of statistical advisers. In this context, experience as a language teacher or materials writer may well cause them to intervene to a greater extent and reject the limits and topics suggested by the education officer. It is therefore important for the education officer and the researcher to work closely together. A highly

critical report can seriously damage the credibility and career prospects of an education officer and the relevant teachers, since they are judged by their ability to promote (a) learning in pupils and (b) needed change in curricular. As for the researcher, an example of good investigative reporting can make his or her career overnight. However, this is not a place to discuss in detail the topics in which education researchers are likely to show interest.

An area which must also be attended to is the extent to which textbooks, test instructions, and, indeed, the language of classroom management are comprehensible to the learner. Early work concentrated on readability formulae, but more recent work focuses on empirical studies of what people do in practice find difficult (e.g. Gerot, 1984) and on how the results can be formulised in ways that are compatible with patterns of human thinking (e.g. Aronowitz, 1984) maxims for answering reading tests, which relate closely to recent work on prototype theory and natural categorisation, of which a linguistically oriented summary may be found in Lakoff (1982).

The Researcher and Contents of Instructional Materials

An extension of the above is to ask how far natural patterns of conversation are used in course materials (Low & Lau, 1983), and more importantly, how far such patterns are actively promoted by the materials. Furthermore, the way course materials appear in the classroom and how learners develop familiarity with local language discourse expectations need to be considered too. To take one rather obvious example, a researcher might want to know whether a secondary level language course actively helped learners develop strategies for avoiding unnecessarily short conversations with local community speakers. Simply cuing students to talk is not the same as helping them gain the ability to control conversation.

The inverse of the naturalness argument has also been a topic of considerable interest in recent years. In essence, the controversy runs thus; Some say one should use authentic materials extensively in the

classroom (Breen & Candlin, 1980); others say that if the second authentic materials are brought into the classroom, they lose much of their authenticity (Morrow, 1977). A comparative position would argue that consequently, what one should aim at is the creation of an illusion of reality, so that evaluation should be based on the extent to which a lack of authenticity is controlled. A very similar argument with respect to language testing is also put forward by Methold (1983).

Finally, there is the developmental aspect. One would expect someone with a strong interest in research to be particularly aware of relevant developments in language acquisition. One is thinking here of the so-called "task-based" research, which examines the different effects on performance and acquisition of certain types of, say, oral exercises. Research has shown that, in general language teaching situations, "jigsaw" (what Americans call "two-way") exercises produce more complex and more "natural" conversations than do ones where all participants have access to the same information, and more surprisingly, perhaps, the same is frequently true of learner-teacher interactions, as compared with learner-native speaker in bilingual communities or learner-teacher ones (e.g. Long & Porter, 1985; Duff, 1985).

The Publisher

The publisher's interest in evaluation is frequently overlooked, and yet he/she is very much concerned with evaluating course materials, and his/her questions are by no means the same as those asked by the parties so far considered. At the point when an idea or manuscript is submitted, the publisher needs to ask such questions as: Does it fill a gap in the catalogue? Are rival publishers offering something similar; and if not, why will it fit the known buying patterns of the target readership? Is the government of the day likely to endorse the materials? Obviously, publishers are concerned with such pedagogically-oriented arguments.

Publishers also set up projects frequently, devise inhouse guidelines, specify the sort of language to be used in texts, and more recently, have also insisted on how information should be structured within paragraphs

to aid comprehension by backward learners. New books are then subject to evaluation in terms of the degree to which they fit the guidelines, although the guidelines themselves are rarely published, or open to public scrutiny.

In other cases, samples are sent to outside "readers" for evaluation. The resulting evaluation depends on many factors, such as the reader's personal methodological preferences and even the amount of money offered by the publishing house (since it can take a very long time, indeed, to do a highly detailed evaluation). It is not at all clear how far publishers are aware of the degree to which the choice of a particular reader predetermines the nature of the resulting evaluation. It would be of some interest to see a research study examining what happens when the opinions of one or more readers are very different from those of a publishing editor.

The Materials Developer

The materials developer should, ideally, be fed with the results of everyone else's evaluations, in order to have him or her develop and redevelop materials as is necessary. Unfortunately, governments and publishers are often not able to cope with such a flexible approach to materials development, and course revision can become a slow and, at times, even painful process. A second, and equally serious, problem occurs when evaluations are in conflict with each other. In addition, it is often very hard to see how much of the information provided by course evaluation studies is useful at the level of detailed design. Should the developer, therefore, evaluate his or her own textbook? If one does, the accusation of bias may well be levelled against him or her (Johnson, 1981). If one does not, then there is a reasonable chance that the information one really needs will simply not be forthcoming. This may therefore frustrate the conscientious material developer.

Evaluation Networks

It is clear from the above that individuals who evaluate materials do not generally do so in total isolation. In many cases, both programme and materials evaluation can be profitably considered in terms of networks, each of which fits into the overall aims or into the structural systems of communication lines and procedural guidelines of the work at hand (Fitz-Gibbon, 1993). All members of such a network have essentially three attributes:

1. they have roles within the overall enterprise;
2. they have views and opinions about the enterprise, its structure and their roles in it;
3. they frequently tend to make their own independent evaluations of the materials.

Some of these independent evaluations may be selected as being of particular interest, and be fed back as data for other people's evaluations. Thus, learners may or may not tell the teacher what they really think, and teachers, in turn, may or may not tell an educational researcher what really caused them to teach a certain course in the way that they did. As a further illustration, three evaluation situations which are hard to describe adequately in anything other than network terms are hypothesised and outlined below.

(a) Designing In-college Materials

A group of teachers decide that they would like to have materials which involve students self-monitoring and which encourage a greater measure of learner autonomy. They attempt to design a series of formative self-assessment procedures which fit a communicatively-oriented course. It is clear, however, that success depends in part on their own attitudes to their role as class teachers and on various teaching methods. It also depends on their relationship with the learners. Equally, success cannot

be fully achieved without the cooperation of the learners. The materials cannot be improved unless the learners are prepared to comment honestly and productively on them (Potts, 1985; Von Elek, 1985).

(b) Publishing a Textbook

In most cases, publishers tend to evaluate "the situation" and decide that they would like a certain type of course. A writer who is prepared to work to the brief given to him or her is then found. In other cases, a writer submits a concept or a manuscript to a publisher, who then evaluates whether the book would sell. If it is thought that it would, an editor is selected to evaluate it from a pedagogical point of view, in consultation with a number of outside readers. The readers may not have similar views to each other nor those of the publisher. These views may or may not be communicated, in turn, to the author. If they are communicated, the author must then decide if it is worth continuing with the publisher.

In either case, if the project does go ahead, the editor and the author will evaluate each other's ideas and comments. The final version may be the author's but cases are known where the editor publishes a modified version of the work under the author name, without submitting it to the author for approval.

(c) Piloting a Course

Let us say a certain ministry of education asks an overworked education officer to set up a project to pilot a new language course in 10 schools in a selected area. The officer must work with local teachers, a research assistant, and the publisher concerned, who is to help organise the necessary workshops. The teachers feel that their careers could be at stake, and pretend to be enthusiastic. They fail to reveal their real feelings about the workshops. The officer has had no training in evaluation and, hence, does not know exactly what to do with the teachers' comments when he receives them. He, therefore, just makes note of a few salient points and writes them up in his/her own words at a later date. As he/she does not wish to criticise his/her boss, who selected the course in the first place, he tends to select uncontroversial comments. The research

assistant first finds the data-gathering method unfortunate, then becomes perplexed as to how to proceed when further investigation shows that teachers do not like the education officer, avoid training courses he/she has set up, and hence have problems with teaching the new course. They also feel that their teaching might improve if they were to find out how other teachers in the project compensated for gaps in the course, but are unwilling to talk freely in front of the officer or the teacher trainers. The behaviour of all concerned is understandable. The solution in such a case is for the officer to provide a different model or a different approach to piloting courses.

If the network has a clearly directed general objective (like establishing whether a new course is suited to local schools), it is clear that for the objective to be achieved, the person(s) gathering the information must know how evaluations interrelate and try to ensure that the information that ultimately comes in is comparatively undistorted (Nixon, 1988; Doll, 1986). There is an important practical implication here: it means that the evaluation network itself needs to be hypothesised at the project-planning stage, in order to discover where distortion might take place and under what conditions, and then empirically monitor the implementations stage, in order to check that undesirable distortion is not, in fact, occurring. For this to be possible, however, there need to be available a range of models of, say, the inspectorate, along with some indication of the conditions under which they do or do not work well.

Conclusion

The paper has shown that the evaluation of a language learning programme, or of the materials used to teach it, involves more viewpoints than that of the "independent" outside observer. Not only is the observer frequently not quite as external to the system as he or she might like to think, but learner achievement is often affected by the evaluation of others involved, which may well be based on quite different criteria of success. However, despite the large number of recent studies in aspects of language teaching, learning, and assessment, there is much interesting model building and empirical research still to be done.

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